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ARTICLE

Seeking a Mature Relationship With the Natural World: Relational Ontology and Amalgam-Being

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Abstract

Fostering a relationship with the more-than-human world is understood to be crucial in wilding pedagogies. Yet for many, such a relationship is often developed in early life and is limited in complexity and nuance. In this paper, we propose to investigate what a mature relationship with the natural might look like. We do so in three parts. The first part introduces four moments of surprise or pause: "hunh?!" moments. These lead to four associated observations that suggest contemporary limitations on human relationship with place, and in one case, enhancement of it. They are: an idealisation of childhood relationship with the natural world, which is now kept in a separate category, rendering it inaccessible to the adult; an un-knowing of relationality with the natural world through cultural practices that deny or denigrate such a state; the myth of human autonomy, which comes with multiple cultural repercussions; and finally, what we are here calling natural imagination, which pulls in the opposite direction to the first three. An environmentally rooted Haudenosaunee model regards imagination as not simply the purview and possession of humans, but a shared space between people and the natural world. In response to these, in Parts 2 and 3, we propose that a relational ontology — one that *enacts* relationship between humans and the more-than-human — cannot be reached simply by progressing further in intent, sensitivity or theorising from the current assumed model of the psychological development. The abyss between current ontologies and an alternative must be hurdled, if it is to be crossed at all. This may be done by challenging presuppositions that underpin current ontologies and psychologies and moving from theorising to enacting an alternative model. Such a model, in part informed by the fungal research of Merlin Sheldrake, may lead to another way of being human, an enmeshing with the more-than-human, which we call amalgam-being.

Keywords: Environmental education; development; relational ontology; Wild Pedagogies

Introduction

This is an *essaie* in the original sense, in the model of Montaigne (1993). In this paper, we attempt (*essayer*) to work out the relationship between some apparently disparate observations that nonetheless produce a similar questioning response in us and appear to be somehow connected. In this paper, there are few points of certainty; only hunches followed and supporting ideas brought in. We walk through different ideas, getting the sense of where we are being taken by our observations. Ultimately, we pose the question, can simply doing a better job of being human, as it is currently constructed, lead to a mature relationship with the natural world, or is the matter one of ontological shift? We begin by looking at a series of "hunh?!" moments — moments in the journey that have given us pause and caused us to question taken-for-granted reasons or

behaviours. We end the journey with a call for ontological change, and put the challenge to Wild Pedagogies (WP) that its touchstones need to be understood and enacted in this way.[1]

Part One: The four "hunhs?!"

We start with feelings elicited by certain experiences, events, and even readings. We didn't seek out these feelings or encounters; rather, they appeared, disrupted, kept badgering and we took note. There are four key *hunhs?!* that underwrite this essay. Each has given us pause, causing us to sometimes literally and always metaphorically make the sound "hunh?!", with eyebrows raised, lack of comprehension registered, and curiosity incited. We recognise that there is something of interest here, something incompletely understood that needs and continues to demand our attention. The questions will not go quietly into the night. While spontaneous and unintended, we normally take the *hunh?!* sound and feeling to register that further thought, dialogue, wandering and wondering is needed to better understand these ideas. David Jardine has pointed out the importance of noticing these things that worry us or that come up again and again in our thinkings and he suggests taking time with them. He calls this "whiling" (Jardine, 2008, 2013), the idea being that the things that niggle us are worth spending time understanding. What he calls "whiling" is compatible with the *time and practice* touchstone of WP (Jickling et al., 2018a, 2018b).

The first *hunh?!* is that, when asked to reflect on their relationship with the natural world, what comes to mind for many people is an idealised time in childhood (See for instance: Chawla, 2006; Cobb, 1998; Louv, 2008; Tomashow, 1995). These people mention wonder, a deep sense of belonging and/or safety, a reciprocal relationship, and a lack of instrumentality in their recollections of themselves-in-relationship-with-the-world. Long ago, in innocent childhood, they did not want to *get something out* of nature; they just wanted to be in and with the more-than-human world. They were able to have rich relationships: ones that involved communication, sharing, and perhaps a kind of egolessness. When pushed a little, those who respond in this way might reflect on how this has changed for them now. The 'real world' has caught up, they are too busy for these 'fantasies' of youth, and part of becoming an adult is recognising how the world really works and where humans are positioned in that world. But nonetheless, these rich and important relationships from youth are what they recall: a time of deep, even intimate, connection with the natural world. Now, as adults, this relationship is different, and the change in adulthood is seen as inevitable: it is as though what is now experienced is all that is possible. As adults, they have chosen, been pushed, asked, even forced to "put away childish things." A deep, loving, interconnected, interdependent relationship with the more-than-human world was one such thing. It appears to be kept in a separate category, a long-ago past that is different from what an adult could or should experience — as if what was allowable in the innocence of youth is no longer available in the maturity of adulthood.

Sustained by a modernist world that seeks to deny a meaningful relationship with the natural world for the purposes of furthering extraction, self-aggrandisement, and, as WP points out, control, the logical responses are to simply deny, alter, and/or repress these "childish" feelings. For many of us, this is the least painful way to respond. For it is truly difficult to remain in relationship while all around the natural world suffers and succumbs to the violence of an alienated form of humanity that denies the possibility of relational co-existence. The easiest psychic position is to forget that it could be otherwise. The distant instrumentality that characterises our relationship with the natural world is daily affirmed in the contemporary, global West and comes to pave over any other possible imagined way.

This first *hunh?!* — that folks, even those deeply committed to all things eco-, rarely speak of their mature adult relationships with the natural world — is what prompted this paper. It caused

[1]While we use separate terms for humans and the rest of the world, this is for clarity in communication in a world that presupposes these to be separate.

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us to ask, if there are these earlier, positive, loving, communication-filled, and reliable relationships available to the young, why are they not available to, or at least not really discussed by, adults? And, if they are possible and do exist, what might they actually look and feel like? How would they be different from the first flush of connection, love, experienced by the young? Would they be different at all, or is that expectation merely an expression of a developmentalist bias? Can a cultural framework that appears to demand distance from the natural world be altered in some ways? What if an educational environment were created that didn't assume talking to trees was just the prerogative of children and supported the development of these relational children into mature relational adults? Does the world stop talking to human creatures who are trying not to listen? What might it be to be deeply enmeshed in the more-than-human such that human being no longer dominates but is part of? We attempt to address these questions throughout this paper.

The second *hunh?!* derives in part from our experience with several eco-schools: educational environments that spend a great deal of time outdoors and actively seek to include the natural world as co-teacher (Blenkinsop & Beeman, 2010; Jickling et al, 2018b). These are public schools whose work aligns with the touchstones of WP in many ways and are committed to the kinds of cultural change, both in education and beyond, that WP advocates. And yet, even in these places our research has shown that children feel forced to "not know what they know" about their relationality with, connection to, the natural world — which is one explanation for why, when asked to consider it, many people can only recall something from their youth. Many students speak openly about having known something, at some time, when they were younger, but ultimately having to let it go in order to stay part of the human sphere. (Blenkinsop et al, 2018) Let us walk with Raven, a student at one of these schools for a while. We have quoted at length from a previous piece (see: Blenkinsop & Piersol, 2013 for a deeper exploration). In this conversation with one the researchers Raven is 9-years-old.

Raven:

Raven, the fourth grade student . . . , is asked what it is like to listen to the natural world after she mentions that she feels like she can talk to plants.
Researcher: "So do you hear the plant?"
Raven: "Yeah, but you have to hear it through your heart."
Researcher: "I was going to ask where you hear it . . . do you hear it in your heart?"
Raven: "Little words curl into your mind. You have to know that you're not thinking."
Another day the researcher asks her again what the process of listening to the natural world is like for her . . .
Raven: "This sounds funny, you're focused on something but you're not actually thinking about it. If you're thinking than you're not really listening. See I can't do it now when I'm talking."
Researcher: "Do you feel like you have 'conversations' with the natural world?"
Raven: "It's not exactly like that, it's not 'speaking' it's more like energy or signals. You don't hear it out loud. It's something that your mind and only your mind can understand because nature is that open to any language. So if you were just thinking, not even in your language, just showing pictures, it would still work."
Researcher: "The conversation you mean?"
Raven: "Yes, it doesn't have to be 'speaking'".
Researcher: "So you mentioned 'energies' and 'signals' what did you mean by that?"
Raven: "Well see you speak your way, they speak different ways, like thousands of different ways. Billions. It's like the birds with those signals, like when you see a bird flapping up in the sky and a flock of birds how they all move at the same time, it's because they tell each other like through mental speaking." (Blenkinsop & Piersol, 2013)

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Here we witness a deep relationship at play. A kind of orientation to the world where Raven is in fact communing with, immersed and embedded therein. Literally a part thereof. The next time we encounter Raven is in discussion with their mother. The mother is concerned for Raven's relationship with the natural world as it is becoming clear that they are recognising that this kind of thing is not culturally sanctioned. At 11 years old Raven is being coached by their parent to understand which Raven to be in particular settings. Experiences of being misunderstood, laughed at, and even ignored have caused Raven some anxiety and pushed them to set their relational self aside in order to "belong" to the human world that surrounds them. This in spite of the fact that for Raven the relationship with nature is deeper, more authentic, and less fraught with danger, confusion, and threats of violence.

Presumably, this pressure comes through the culture at large, compressed in space and time at the school site. Even active attempts to countervail it are subject to the overall, extremely powerful pressures at a societal level. WP makes a distinction between wild and domesticated (See: Jickling et al., 2018b, chapter 2). In the process of schooling, we are taming children, making them less free. By separating them from their relationships with the natural world, they are being domesticated into a form of being human that is alienated. The myth of human separation plays on while they are forced to stay part of this detached anthropocentric human culture.

From a socio-cultural perspective, Carol Gilligan's work (Gillian, 2016; Gilligan & Snider, 2018) suggests that the underlying ethos of neoliberalism and, in particular, patriarchal society precludes a deeply relational space with other people and we are extending this to include the natural world. Violence, or the threat thereof, must often be used to overcome the natural inclination of children to be in relationship and to understand the world through relationship. There are parallels here to the way a relational ontology with the natural world is overcome. The implied or direct threat applied to the child is that the kind of 'being weird' entailed in maintaining relationship with the natural world will lead to human/social ostracism.

At the extreme edge of un-relationality, both military and corporate systems require a zealous anti-relational ethos to thrive. For what would an army or a profit-driven economy look like if it were constantly concerned about the well-being of the other? Anti-relational influences are in strong evidence today, as it becomes apparent how clearly oil and gas companies knew about the effects of climate change, long ago (Kramer, 2020). Short-term profit maximisation requires that the actual interdependence between people and place be denied. In the long term, what can be seen as "externalities" — predictable consequences directly or indirectly related to the course of action at hand — more and more pressingly demand notice. Absence of concern with harming other beings is not simply hubristic; in the long game, it is also unwise. Wealth can only insulate a little from generalised ecological destruction.

What connects all of these models of un-relationality is that significant work must be done to create a being that is capable of at least appearing to be less dependent on others — less in relationship with. Yet schools, as a major manifestation and shaper of expected social behaviour, help to do this separating work by preparing beings to be autonomous individuals. The evidence is in the longing we hear in Raven's case. Raven does not want to lose their relationship with the natural world, yet finds themselves in this untenable position: choose to remain part of the natural world or be part of the human culture in which they were raised and which is actively destroying the natural world. These are another kind of child-soldiers who are required to kill the natural world/parent; to deny part of themselves, feel less, adopt an eco-double consciousness (Blenkinsop et al., 2018), and accept the destruction in order to belong.

This leads to our third *hunh?!* moment. It rises from the previous two and questions the assumptions of the modern western conception of *I* — its location and boundaries — and its development. (It also speaks to the muddiness we encounter in trying to separate ideas, in order to render them in a clear light, while also dealing with impressions of phenomena that are necessarily interlinked, overlapping, and integrated). We have noticed how the assumed human developmental trajectory in the contemporary, global West tends to conclude with the

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autonomous individual (See Skinner, Piaget, Bruner and Vygotsky). These thinkers may speak of an individual's growth, maturation, and relationality within socio-cultural frameworks, but this does not lead to what we think of as a relational ontological being. The imagined individual may be a caring, thoughtful, responsible person, but the person is still understood as being, at their core, autonomous, and therefore separate from the world around. The term *autonomous* does not necessarily mean that the person is disconnected and not in relationship with anything, but it does suggest that what we are — our being — really stops at the level of the skin. It is this body, and what it does and thinks, that we are responsible for and that defines "I." We are ultimately a separate being from other beings, and no amount of fancy theorising will change that. We are not, as some Indigenous traditions suggest, part of place or a member of an extended ecological clan, surrounded by kin.

The myth of the autonomous individual, who is the cause and result of their own efforts, is in synchrony with the American dream of the self-made man. This is the enlightenment goal of individual emancipation run riot, yet oddly resulting in the loss of particular freedoms, or *wildnesses* (Jickling et al, 2018b), that are only available in deep relation. The myth of the autonomous individual in control of their own destiny shunts aside what would be obvious to an external observer: that they are, with each breath, with each step and with each metabolic moment, reliant on the natural world and the human societies that contain them. In concert with this larger community are possibilities that simply don't exist in isolation. The possibility of existence, itself, appears to not register to those espousing this view.

While the model of the autonomous individual is easily shown to be flawed, both the ontology and ethos of the contemporary, global West campaign against this. As construed, the ontology of the person is rendered isolated. *Homo mobilis* is by definition instantly extractible from place (Beeman, 2006). The most productive — and therefore most successful — person in this model would provide for their own needs without any deeper connection to place that might diminish their productive capacity. Relationships are that which *is done* when the real work of providing for the needs of the individual has been performed. They are instrumental affiliations. That the resources to provide for these needs derive from an ecosystem that we might once have been part of and cared for deeply tends to be ignored.

Psychologically, this ideal of the autonomous individual is about 'having your shit together': a self-reliant, hard-working person, able to take on the responsibility for themselves, with an eye to successfully promoting causes and even relationships that benefit themselves. In current political contexts, the autonomous individual is also the assumed basic unit of democracy: each person represents and competes or co-operates instrumentally to serve their own perceived needs. Human rights discourse in fact are also built on this same idea of the autonomous individual and, as Zembylas (2017) has compelling pointed out, this denies the epistemological and ontological realities of myriads of cultures, thus, ignoring other forms of being and knowing while continuing the colonial project.

There are exceptions to this, although the self-branded world makes it difficult for these necessarily isolated individuals to survive. The autonomous individual may have a moral framework and this framework may contain an awareness of others — other people and other beings — but these are considered afterthoughts. This paradigm is the undergirding of neo-liberalism. Perhaps this may seem to be an oversimplification, but do we — the writers of this paper — think that modern Western education as enacted around the world broadly relies on a developmental model that posits the autonomous and detached individual as its aim? We do. The ideal is the functioning individual that takes care of themselves. The simple, and much more ecologically elegant *actual* relational connection with other beings is replaced with a transactional model. This one is heavily reliant on the wasteful transformation of what was something like mutually beneficial flourishing (Blenkinsop & Morse, 2017; Jickling et al, 2018b) into instrumental dealings based on economic value. The abstract appeal of this model is that, without messy relational ontology to consider, what is created or traded may be completely dissociated from our

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actual mutual interdependence. And yet, what if there are examples that point in other directions? What options appear if, for example, we encounter something about the imagination being shared? That might add fodder to this discussion: our fourth hunh?!.

The fourth *hunh?!* moment pulls in the opposite direction to the above three. It came through encountering Sheridan and Longboat (2006) noting of a Haudenosaunee model of imagination. In it, what would usually be called the human capacity for imagination is seen differently. The "mature" imagination is not the personal purview and possession of an individual human, that is an immature form; it is a shared space between people and the natural world. "Imagination is understood to be a quality of mind in settler culture. In Haudenosaunee/ Mohawk tradition, the same quality is understood to be animal and spiritual helpers manifesting their presence in one's life. . . . [The settler conception of] imagination dominates where fear of the unknown, uncertainty of memory, and placelessness thrive" (Sheridan & Longboat, 2006, 365). Thus, a human claim to creativity owes a debt to place or better still, the claim of creativity is a falsehood — the human claimant is simply the opener of the gift and the interpreter of said imaginative creation for the human part of this shared world. In this model, the human skin is only a delimiting factor when conceptualised as a division between it and the world. It does not go far enough even to think of the human skin as being porous to the world, because such an image still presents the human as a separate, though now porous, entity. As described by Sheridan and Longboat, for the Haudenosaunee, the mature human imagination is no longer the possession of the one but the shared space of the many. Knowing this is, in part, what makes this understanding a mature one. And, in fact, the very of idea of the many dissolves. The usual view of the global, modern West — that imagination is something that is wholly the purview of the human operant — is seen as inaccurate and immature, even an underdevelopment. In this new relational ontology, all of the apparent parts are altered. So, it is not so much a composite as an amalgam. The amalgam is not all being — for that move makes the error, probably a colonial one, of ignoring the particularity of this experience. It is an amalgam of human with something like what-is-going-on-in-this-place-that-can-connect-with-what-is-human-at-this-time.

Thus, in synchrony with this *hunh?!* of a shared imagination and the possibility of a less individualised and more relational psyche pointed at in *hunh?! #3*, a relational ontology may not have the same developmental stages as are assumed in much of modernist public education. It may not even have stages (though the suggestion of an immature and then a mature imagination points in that direction), that the contemporary global West envisions for the long trek to becoming an autonomous individual. In the model of individual development in the contemporary, global West, the child begins in one-ness, goes through different phases including a clear need to separate from others (particularly mother/family but also possibly the natural world in an earlier stage), always described as relating to that individual, and finally arrives at a stage of autonomy. But several Elders of our acquaintance describe children as already complete beings. If this being were permitted to continue — if, say, Raven's young being were supported into continuing in a state of relationality with the natural world — then, in terms of their relationality, the adult version might not be much different than the child's version, though perhaps more thoroughly relational.

For all this to happen in its fullness would require that Raven and others like them were actually embedded in a cultural framework that is relational in its ontology. In order to create the kinds of spaces that would allow Raven to become her relational adult self and not have to sacrifice this so as to fit the individualised world in which she is immersed. And assuming a non-relational starting point to be that currently experienced by most on Turtle Island today, then for children from an individualised culture to become mature ontologically relational adults would require some very complex educating. Particularly on the part of adults who are seeking to become more relational themselves

At this point, these four *hunhs?!* have pushed us into some thinking around what might be some of the qualities, even realities, of the mature relational adult and hopefully made it apparent why it is so important to think into, and, more importantly, to live into this being. But before we

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dig too much more into the mature relational adult it behoves us to spend a little time going over the ontological ground and clarifying, as best we can, the distinction we are noting between individual and relational ontologies, and offering our best guess for how we might educate towards a more relationally mature adult.

Part two: Ontology of difference

What we are calling a relational ontology is a way of being in the world such that the assumed "I" of an individualised ontology does not exist fully, nor can it be understood completely without seeing, encountering, experiencing the enacted relations with other humans and especially with the immediate and particular more-than-human place in which this arises. We propose that a relational ontology cannot be reached by simply progressing further in intent, or sensitivity, or theorising in a straight course from the dominant model of the autonomous individual. Recall the informed and sensitive but nonetheless ontologically removed human, often unaware of and tending to act contrary to their own actual entanglement in the world — or Raven, who is learning to embark on this same trajectory. The ontological frame they are situated in and its intended autonomy only pulls them outside the realm of interdependence with other beings and away from place-human being. This is a kind of being that includes a shared imagination.

What is required in becoming ecologically relational beings is that each act and each moment of being embeds the person further and increases connectivity within an ecosystem. We offer the following alternative models.

The first is predicated on Merlin Sheldrake's fungal investigations (Sheldrake, 2020). Sheldrake's fungal world is an interconnected one. The hyphae that make up the fruiting bodies — the mushroom — also make up the underground mycelial networks. This system permits these large fungal networks to stay in touch with themselves through not merely chemical, but electrical signalling. One study, Sheldrake reports, noted that the rate of electrical pulses doubled when a block of wood was placed on a mycelial network. Wood is food for this mycelium. While not functionally equivalent to a human brain, it appears that the structure for nutrient acquisition and distribution also serves a kind of communications function. And for a large and ancient being — sometimes covering several square kilometres and thousands of years old — this is much more important than the kind of intelligence required to write sentences like this that describe it. The point of this is that what the western scientific mind sees as a bunch of separate mycelial networks actually isn't. An underlying interconnection occurs in ways not comprehensible to a superficial human glance, particularly one programmed to see separateness. Such may be also the case with interconnectivity between species and even with human outliers.

The second example derives from a school psychologist coming to visit an eco-school and changing not just his interpretations of well-being, but his regular practice, because of the interwoven-ness of the school. Because of the structure of the eco-school, his normal practice, which was to pull the identified student out of "class" to work one-on-one, made no sense. There was no "classroom" from which to pull the student and no "private place" to work. A couple of noteworthy things happened as a result. The first, was that in an outdoor setting, it was harder to recognise the "identified" student. This inexorably moved the psychologist away from a particular person, and their "deficit." The "problem" was less clearly situated in and around a single individual. As he walked to and from the learning sites his interactions with other students showed that there were complex and interconnected layers and needs at play and that other students required and desired attention as well. Also, it became apparent that the individual student who was in fact behaving differently (read: less problematically) in this eco-environment was actually a product of their context/environment (human, structural, communal). In some ways, they were just a symptom of something/s happening in community. This moved the psychologist outside of the realm of what was normally assumed: an individual problem, individual evaluation/

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intervention/restoration, and even an idea of individual psyches. This, in turn, led him to think of the "identified" student as a manifestation of something occurring in a communal psyche.

In this situation, the conversation tended to remain in the range of the human psyche, but what if we what we were actually talking about was a shared psyche with natural world? Or, perhaps, if a 'collective unconscious' that included the more-than-human? What we are imagining is that the model of the autonomous individual, however enlightened that individual may be, be replaced with a completely different being that is enacted through relational ontology. This is a being that is dually and multiply located, with various nexuses, composed of varying stuffs. It is an enmeshing between human and the world of which the human is only a part: a place-human being. In such a model, if my being-ness is understood as not separate from world, then my psyche is also not ever separate from natural world. We have not yet encountered this shared psyche in a way that can be easily reported, but recall Merlin Sheldrake's mycelial networks as representations or possibly maps that serve to visually express the reciprocal relationships between beings. Or, perhaps the mycelial conversation is not many beings coming together but a being-ness with different aspects. With this actual physiology employed as a figurative image, human life can be seen as moment-by-moment integrations, de-integrations and re-integrations, in endless interaction and thus inseparably interconnected with other beings in the world around it. In fact, the separateness of human life, and its automatically bestowed value, comes to look awkwardly fabricated. The actual stuff that keeps this relationally integrated being alive — or that is an aspect of its relationality — is every bit as earthy as the next organism. And, as human uniqueness in almost every field that used to define humanity is questioned, the actual separateness of those other beings is similarly put into question (Beeman & Blenkinsop, 2021). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) invite us to consider being space as a shared plane of immanence in a state of perpetual becoming as no permanent or final form is occupied and each being is of the same stuff as another.

Merlin Sheldrake's work also has another advantage: its interspecies location serves as an imaginary for more complex locating of human being. Thus, it allows for an undoing of a standard form of anthropocentrism. Fungi appear to be very different creatures than humans. Trying to understand them requires an opening of the kind of shared imagination Sheridan and Longboat referred to. As an example of this, Sheldrake gives an account of his own experience. He volunteers for a medical study in which LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide-25) is administered to adventurous scientists who are seeking insight into complex research questions that they have not, as yet, been able to solve. His question is about fungi. As LSD was originally synthesised from a fungus, he is employing the insights afforded by the fungal chemical influence on him to better understand fungal relationships. He is particularly interested in what a particular flower in the tropical rainforests he studies offers in trade or as a gift for the fungi that allow it to live. Note that his ontological model still presupposes separateness between beings. The flower does not photosynthesise, so it has no sugars that it can offer. Under the vivid influence of LSD, and in a state of lessened influence of his own ego, he imagines the changing, busy, even chaotic world of fungi, and he deeply experiences the interaction between plant root and mycelium. This causes him to posit that perhaps what the root affords is a refuge for the mycelial journeyer; a place of respite and endless interconnectivity. Is this a plant/fungal relationship or is some new synthesis created in the process?

In other words, the world Sheldrake envisions is one so full of interconnections with other fungi and with other beings that it becomes overwhelming — at least to the human observer. Sheldrake notes that it is imagination (as usually conceptualised or perhaps not) that we are dealing with here. What he learns, is taught, in his interaction with LSD might be nonsense - not even just wrong. But it raises the issue that a full understanding of our interdependence with other beings requires opening the ontological individual into an ontos — a being state — of the shared imagination, because other beings are, by definition, different. Recall that LSD works in part by lessening the influence of the ego. What happened to Sheldrake through his interaction with LSD is simultaneously the loss of the self and the expanding of the self, the creation of more inclusive

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broader self as it were, to beyond the level of the skin. If this is the case, then the ontologically inclusive imaginative route we propose suggests that we may find ourselves much more interconnected than ways hitherto thought.

All of the above examples preserve the separateness of beings. But Merlin's work also does something deeper: it provides another model through which to reflect on the actual complexity of human being. The mycelium does not just form a relationship with a plant. We think that relationship-ing actually leads to an amalgam that is something new. A fungi-centric view, as he calls it, provides a route away from anthropocentrism and an individualist ontology while permitting us to view the complexity of what actually already occurs in the world.

Chris's early doctoral research (2006) and later work (2019; 2021) encountered a deeply interconnected, relational way of being with the natural world which certain Teme Augama Elders of his acquaintance articulated. In this way of being, which he called *attentive receptivity*, a deeply interconnected world was revealed that could not simply be explained by adding to the pile of sensitivities and knowledges of people who were constructed as autonomous individuals. The world spoke directly to people; human life was lived, in part, to understand the direction offered by the world; and this included what the framing and actions on a particular day would be. Particular places were sometimes travelled to for advice. In other words, not just particular participants, like an otter or merganzer (Beeman & Blenkinsop, 2021), but what was referred to often as "the land" had agency, could teach, and actively influenced the life and choices of human participants in the ecosystem. We will discuss the relevance of this to Wild Pedagogical ideas around nature as co-teacher in the final section. These Elders spoke of being an enmeshed and deeply interconnected part of an ecosystem, with ongoing interactions, responsibilities, and kinship duties in that ecosystem making up the bulk of human activity (Kimmerer, 2013). Attentive receptivity was characterised by an enacted way of being in the world such that the wellbeing of human and other participants and the world was ensured, with a moment-by-moment awareness of the broad and overarching scope of things. While these cosmologies may preserve the separateness of human being, the emphasis is on a being state that is interwoven. We want to push this idea a little further to its natural result: that the human being becomes an aspect of an ecosystem, thus providing it with certain human capacities like consciousness.

This begins to sound a great deal like Sheridan and Longboat's offering: that imagination is shared with the land, rather than existing in the mind of the human imaginer. If this is true, then there is both an epistemic and an ontological enmeshing of human being with world, and we are both contributors and receivers in this arrangement. But we are neither the creators nor alone with these imaginings. Nor are we the centre of these webs, merely nodes in larger entanglements. In Merlin Sheldrake's example, there was no vehicle for understanding at the time these experiences occurred, yet the miniscule chemical interactions between miniscule organisms suggest levels of constant interaction between beings, all the time.

Thus, we imagine that a mature relationship of adult humans with the natural world would look something like both enacting and being aware of the actual interconnectivity between self and place. It would possibly mean feeling less than oneself when separated from one's place. It would also include reducing the dominance of human will. It would put pause on transient individual human wants and would include attending to deeper shared needs. The ecosystem would be actively consulted and space made for gifts to be offered and received in good ways. Perhaps, the decision is the creation of a pollinator garden which benefits the community. It would entail considering the wants and needs of the place and becoming part of and re-turning to the natural world, rather than insulating from. It would include keeping eyes open for agency in the more-than-human, from the obvious, like squirrels protecting their pinecones and chastising human interlopers, to the tinier moments, like mosses seeking out what they need to survive, to simply finding one's path through being in the world with a mind less encumbered with individual — as concept, locus of control, or centre of everything — and more inclined to eco-being thriving.

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The thoughts one thinks in this latter scenario might appear to be one's own, but that they tend to occur differently in the natural world suggest some influence of the latter.

Part three: Addressing the four hunhs

In this concluding section, for clarity's sake, we return to the language normally used to describe people, other beings, and place. This artificial division is the way the modernist, global West tends to treat these issues. By using this language, in this section, we attempt to work through what some of the stages — if there can be stages — in transformation to another way of being in the world might look like.

In recent years, there has been much talk of building human relationships with the natural (Chawla, 2006; Louv, 2008; Sobel, 2004). But what appears to be assumed in this discussion is that through will, intent, and especially knowledge, we may simply add to the being state of existing participants in the contemporary, global West. Many thoughtful people do have sensitive and reciprocal interactions with the more-than-human. But on the whole, we think that the idea of additive change is not only not enough, but may actually contribute to human separateness from the world, as long as the underlying register of the autonomous individual remains intact (Blenkinsop & Ford, 2018). Unless being changes, human separateness might be better concealed in a world in which humans add to their knowledge *of*. Knowledge is important, which is why we continue to write papers like this one. But on its own, knowledge only contributes to the impression that *one now knows how to go about becoming a different kind of person.* This may be true, but like a medical script, does little good without being absorbed or enacted. Thus, what we propose here is not merely understanding what would have to be done, but doing it in order to gain full immersive understanding.

On the first *hunh?!* — the thinking of one's relationship with the world in terms of one's own past childhood experiences — we suggest a process of deconstructing one's actual, current, enacted relationship with the natural world. Leaving aside the emotional feelings about the world for the time being, which are at the same time important, easily evoked, and often serve to conceal actual responsibility, a human being depends entirely on the natural world for life. In contrast, the natural world depends relatively little on a human being for its continued existence. In fact, given the sheer mass of humans and, in rich countries, their excessive ecological demands, the natural world would likely be better off without that person. In our own lives, how might we live so that this would not be the case?

Truth comes before reconciliation. On Turtle Island, there has been a tendency to try to effect reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures without attending adequately to accurate history, i.e., truth. We think the same is likely to occur in a reconciliation that needs to happen with the more-than-human. For if nature is colonised (Blenkinsop et al., 2017) then alternatives are complicated by questions of privilege and power over. Honestly looking at what one takes in living and what one gives back might be a first stage. As Kimmerer (2013) points out, recognising and enacting reciprocity is an important component of this project. The taking could be divided into categories of needs and wants. The needs have many physical demands, for example, air, water, soil in which to grow food, or food, itself. But there are other beings with needs that may provide counterpoint or completely countervail human needs. One question might be, given the limitations of humanness (we cannot, for example, photosynthesise) what would describe the kind of person who would be of most benefit to the overall system we call Earth? Living lightly, certainly. But also, perhaps, committing to and effecting political change. We might think of which aspects of being we are choosing, or may be asked to choose, by the shared imagination between people and the natural world. These ideas link with certain touchstones in WP. The work of building these relationships will take *Time and Practice. Mutual flourishing* — rising from the idea of self-willedness — requires a commitment to attending to other beings while

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potentially limiting one's own desires. *Activism* — as part a commitment to *social change* — moves personal choices outward to include the community. When this is rooted in a life lived without placing excessive demands upon an ecosystem, political activism can multiply many-fold the effects of a small number of human actors. Invoking the idea of *aspects* invites the question of what aspects we are choosing in our particular expression of human as an ecologically relational becoming. Perhaps this work could take place with other humans in the presence of, support of, recognition of, and with the sanction of many beings that already successfully resist being controlled by humans: some insects, some mosses, perhaps, some trees, some animals, some spared waterways. In this context, the violence inflicted by people in the daily business of living can sometimes be more clearly seen. Truly giving up a frivolous want can be easier when one is in the presence of beings who might benefit from such an act. When a human is in relational ontology, they would also benefit from the health of others in the entanglement. If part of the body is suffering the whole body does so as well. Deliberating what constitutes an *honourable harvest*, in Robin Wall Kimmerer's phrasing, in the context of that ecosystem, might be a first step.

On the second *hunh?!*, we might consider countering trends at all ages — but especially for children — that require humans to deny their ecological relationality. This move is especially relevant for educators. Recall the earlier discussion that noted how Raven and others found themselves being shaped by societal expectations of what was considered usual behaviour for people, even in the relatively safe space of an ecological school. As with sexism and racism, noting moments of reinforcement of old stereotypes is key. Chris recalls particular moments in childhood, youth and adulthood in which he was required to pretend or to feign an indifference to the natural world, as part of the process of growing into manhood. As he denied the relationship, it became easier and easier to deny it, until it threatened to take over who he was. He came to understand that it was considered improper to encounter feelings like love for the natural world, except in circumstances which clearly limited the emotion, rendering it less threatening to a culture that defined itself by not being connected to the natural world in order to better use and destroy it, and probably to offset the fear of it and further the need for control (Jickling et al., 2018b). The need to resist domestication is an ongoing theme in WP. Yet, in regaining the relationship, he was considered less tough than a man should be, especially in exposing feelings like love for the natural world. If we are looking for a mature adult relationality with and in the natural world, adult actors are needed who can both offer examples of how to be an ecologically relational adult while simultaneously creating safe spaces where children can do likewise, perhaps furthering its possibilities in spite of adult limitations.

Along with this goes addressing the third *hunh?!:* challenging the autonomous individual as the end goal of human development. Quite apart from what we have said about an alternative — a relational ontology — there needs to be a direct challenge to the model of maturing that we espouse in the contemporary, global West. This will entail broad changes to the culture as a whole, and because cultural change is needed, education is involved. Public education in the global West is built on developmental models that assume the autonomous individual as goal. What might education start to look like if one of its goals were relationally mature adults, immersed in community and enmeshed in the actions of mutually beneficial flourishing?

This relates to the Wild Pedagogical work towards eco-socio-cultural change (Fettes & Blenkinsop, 2023; Jickling et al, 2018b). This is obvious in the other areas of culture that have been hitherto recognised, such as in issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation. But, limiting social critique to these, as important as they may be, only posits a human world that is without any meaningful reliance on or interdependence with the more-than-human. It also fails to acknowledge continuing ecological injustices. Cultural change is, amongst other things, an educational problem. As Murray Sinclair suggests (regarding truth and reconciliation for Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships on Turtle Island) "Education got us into this mess and education will get us out of it" (See: https://www.nccie.ca/reconciliation-and-nccie/). But not

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just any education. The practice of education ought actively to address the immense and pressing need to alter human self-focus, to address more broadly ecosystem thriving and issues of social and ecological justice.

The final *hunh?!,* the Haudenosaune understanding of imagination as distributed throughout and shared with the land, with occasional gifts presented into human consciousness, may serve to illustrate how not only human imagination but all actions, thoughts, psyches, and speech are linked to and interdependent with the natural world. A new kind of ecosystem-oriented collective consciousness as well as being may bear further investigations. That human being could also entail an enmeshed new composite psyche is an exciting educational possibility.

A shared being/imagination/amalgam, involving WP principles of mutual flourishing, a mature relationship with, a shared imagination with the natural world provides an alternative to what is normally offered in the contemporary, global West. As educators, we may choose to open ourselves to an imaginative space that is not simply controlled by human will or intent — read an actually *un*imaginative space. We might invoke the power of what is more-than-human, finding ourselves as beings with something to offer, but with still very limited ecological value. Our ability to come up with different ways of being and doing are culturally limited. Some of the experiences of teachers and researchers at the Maple Ridge school confirmed this (Blenkinsop et al., 2019). Imaginations of students there were thus also culturally limited. But what if literally a world of possibilities were open to the imagination? What if it included immersion in a natural world, providing opportunities to receive its gifts? And if this imagination were not simply of the human kind, but of the worldly kind? Surely, part of our pedagogical work would then be to offer imaginings, possibilities, *stuff,* that is not limited to the human world and that expands the range of possibilities from human-centred ones to something other — to some amalgam we cannot yet know because it has not been (collectively and worldly) imagined. Or, perhaps, that has already been imagined by one aspect of being, but which human aspects of being have not yet heard or opened themselves to the possibility of co-imagining.

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